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More than 1.3 million adults in Indiana report doctor-diagnosed arthritis. Most are working age (18-64), although a greater percentage of older adults (65+) have arthritis and experience greater activity limitation. Pain is the most common reason people over age 55 report that they curtail their physical activity.

The effects of arthritis can be minimized by engaging in regular moderate physical activity, maintaining a health weight, and protecting joints.

Exercise moderately

Moderate exercise can decrease arthritis pain and prevent disability by increasing flexibility, strengthening muscles that support joints, and helping to maintain a healthy weight. Patients should be advised to accumulate 30 minutes per day most days. Those who are very sedentary should work up to 15 minutes of gentle stretching before adding cardiovascular and strengthening exercises.

As health care providers, we can play an important role by encouraging our patients with arthritis to exercise. Researchers have found that patients advised that physical activity would help their arthritis were more likely to have engaged in recent exercise. Studies have also shown that physicians can assess and advise patients on exercise in 3-4 minutes, without lengthening exam time. Physicians report that providing this service enhances their practice.

Maintain a healthy weight

Even modest weight loss can help reduce arthritis pain. The Framingham study found that losing as little as 11 pounds cut the risk of joint pain and stiffness in half. People who need to lose weight should aim for 60-80 minutes of moderate exercise per day everyday.

Research has shown that patients were 2.8 times more likely to try to lose weight if advised to do so by their physician. Another found that physician advice was the strongest predictor for attempted weight loss. A third showed that physician advice to lose weight raised the probability that people ate fewer calories and less fat, and used exercise as a weight reduction method.

Protect the joints

Arthritis is sometimes caused by injury to or overuse of a joint. People who work in occupations requiring strenuous or repetitive movement are at greater risk. Accidents or athletic injuries can also result in arthritis. Using proper protective equipment or body mechanics are important prevention strategies. Patients should be advised to engage the strongest, largest muscles and joints possible to accomplish a task, e.g., lifting a sack of groceries from the bottom with both hands and holding it close to the body instead of gripping the handle with one hand, or squatting down to pick something off the floor instead of bending from the waist.

Resources are available for health care providers who want to encourage their patients with arthritis to become more physically active: 1) *Movement is Medicine* is an easy-to-read booklet of exercises safe for people with arthritis. To order free copies, send an e-mail to alacey@clarian.org, or call 317-962-2533. 2) Land-based and aquatic exercise programs for people with arthritis are available in locales throughout the state. Contact Jenny Conder at the Arthritis Foundation, Indiana Chapter, for more information: jconder@arthritis.org or 1-800-783-2342.